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Opening Statement from Interim Chief Steve Bell to Public Safety and National Security Committee – March 24, 2022

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(Ottawa)—Distinguished members of the Committee. I am pleased to be given this opportunity to meet with you today.

Joining me today is Deputy Chief Trish Ferguson, who was the operational lead for the successful resolution of the illegal protest.

We are here today to answer questions about the illegal protest that occurred in Ottawa between January 28, 2022 and February 20, 2022.

As the police service of jurisdiction in the Nation's Capital, our members are well practiced in keeping the peace during demonstrations. Every year, hundreds of protests occur in the Capital.

Our officers are trained to maintain the safety of both demonstrators and the public at large. The vast majority of these protesters are peaceful and lawful and protestors return home when their point has been made.

Unprecedented and Unlawful

This unlawful protest was unprecedented.

The protesters brought thousands of vehicles to our city with the full intention of disrupting the Capital.

After they arrived, many chose to stay and were clear in their words and actions that they meant to do damage to our community.

Our police service received regular reports of intimidating and threatening behaviour towards residents on a daily basis. We had reports of hate crimes being committed and willful disregard of police and court orders.

The protesters used their vehicles as a tool to back up their behaviours, honking their horns and racing and driving dangerously around the streets in the downtown core.

Despite our attempts at negotiation, threats of investigation or enforcement, the illegal and disruptive behaviours continued throughout the protest and became elevated on weekends when more protesters arrived.

Our response as a police service, along with our many partners was to work to safely manage the disruptions, contain the behaviours and negotiate the protesters out.

In the early days, we were able to ensure that no serious injuries, deaths or damage to infrastructure was committed.

But that is not the standard of policing any resident of our city or any Canadian would expect.

As a police service, we understood quickly that we needed assistance from all levels of government in the form of legislative powers and policing resources if we were to safely remove this unlawful protest from our streets.

Community Impact

It's important that this committee understand and appreciate the negative impacts this behaviour had on our entire community, businesses and especially the impact on our vulnerable, marginalized and LGBT2QS+ and racialized communities.

Our centretown is a diverse, proud and vibrant place.

But during the protest, we saw clear signs of hate like swastikas, anti-government sentiment, leaders posting threatening language on social media and other various forms of social disorder.

It shook their faith and confidence in the ability of police and government to keep them safe.

We have seen the same effects in cities like Calgary, Windsor and Coutts, Alberta where similar protests were held.

Public Safety

Our goal from the outset was always to remove this protest safely.

In order to do that it required the careful coordination between all of our policing partners to develop a strategy that would ensure a safe resolution.

All three levels of government responded with legislative measures that aided our strategy. I want to thank the City of Ottawa and the Ontario government for the changes it brought forward.

And, I want to thank the Federal Government for invoking the Federal Emergencies Act.

From a policing perspective, this legislation provided the OPS the ability to:

- Prevent people from participating in this unlawful protest;
- Restrict people from traveling to any area where this unlawful protest was taking place;
- Secured protected places and critical infrastructure;
- Create and maintain the secured area to prevent people from violating the Act and safely remove people who were attempting to do so;
- Go after the money funding the protest;
- Require third parties to assist us in removing the heavy vehicles that were clogging our streets and creating a safety hazard.

It was a critical piece of our effort. But it was only one piece.

Another critical piece was the rallying of police resources from the RCMP, the OPP and police services from across Canada. I want to thank them all for their support.

Methodical Plan

As you saw, once we had all of those authorities and those resources in place, we were able to implement a methodical police operation between February 17-20th with an integrated command led by the Ottawa Police, RCMP and OPP to safely remove the protest.

There were 230 arrests, 118 criminally charged with more than 400 criminal counts. Hundreds of provincial offence notices were issued. These cases are still moving through the courts and multiple investigations are ongoing.

There is no doubt, in a democracy such as Canada, that a discussion and assessment on the appropriateness of the invocation of the *Emergencies Act*, that provided police broader powers, is important.

I am pleased to be here to contribute to that discussion.

I can tell you that Police chiefs across the country are watching this discussion because they know that similar situations could or are occurring in their own jurisdictions.

I have spoken to many of them who have sought out advice.

Finally, I do want to reiterate my pride in all of the police members who worked on this operation, including the many who came from across Canada to assist us in this effort.

This was truly a Canadian effort and it showed the vital role police play in maintaining our democracy and keeping our residents safe.

Deputy Chief Ferguson and I look forward to answering your questions.

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CONTACT:

Media Relations Section

Tel: 613-236-1222, ext. 5366

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Contact Us

Ottawa Police Service

P.O. Box 9634 Station T, Ottawa, Ontario, K1G 6H5

T: 613-236-1222, TTY: 613-232-1123

Email Us

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